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The "American Century" Reconsidered

Michael J. Hogan, ed, The Ambiguous Legacy: U.S. Foreign Relations in the "American Century". (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)
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and
Frank Ninkovich, The Wilsonian Century: US Foreign Policy since 1900.
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999)
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These two books represent the first significant attempts to assess American foreign policy during what publisher Henry Luce famously termed "The American Century". Hogan's volume is a collection of sixteen diverse essays, all but one of which was first published in the journal *Diplomatic History*, alongside Luce's original 1941 article. Ninkovich's book is a narrative history of US foreign policy since 1900, although it views America's role through the original interpretive lens of Wilsonian internationalism.

Hogan's collection begins with Luce's famous editorial article, written at the height of American debates over entry into World War II. Luce urged greater American leadership in economic, idealistic (including, freedom, equality, independence, justice, and truth), technical and cultural, and humanitarian spheres in order "to create the first great 'American Century'"(p.29). The essays that follow contain varying opinions and assessments on whether such a century truly came to be.

Written by an impressive array of historians and political scientists from across the political spectrum, the volume is a well-balanced introduction to the recent history of American foreign relations. As well as containing articles that laud American foreign policy for its role in the defeat of fascism and communism, and for its promotion of liberal democratic ideals throughout the world, other essays consider the less salubrious aspects of American policy, questioning the motives behind American foreign policy and considering whether it has always lived up to its high ethical and moral standards.

In addition to considering more traditional approaches to the study of American foreign policy, the collection also reveals the "state of the art" with regard to diplomatic history. Going beyond the study of established diplomatic channels, many of the essays utilise approaches rarely encountered in diplomatic history. Not only do they consider such neglected factors as the role of non-governmental organisations and culture, it is argued that these factors are essential to understanding the truly American nature of the twentieth century. These essays reveal hitherto obscured aspects of "The American Century", although, for example, little imagination is needed to consider America's global dominance in the cultural sphere. Pushing the boundaries of the discipline, this history of American foreign relations is a stimulating, challenging, and entertaining read.

The first three essays all suggest that Luce's hope for an American Century has indeed been fulfilled, viewing American foreign policy in a positive light and arguing (to varying degrees) that it has been beneficial for the world as a whole. Tony Smith's "Making the World Safe for Democracy in the American Century" highlights the successful American ideology of liberal democratic capitalist internationalism. Concluding that "American power worldwide might indeed be of benefit not only to this country but to the cause of humanity in general so long as it was dedicated to the promotion of democratic government worldwide"(pp.50-1), Smith argues that what's good for the United States is good for the world.

In "'Empire by Invitation' in the American Century", Geir Lundestad argues that the United States "was frequently *invited* to play the kind of great power role it did after the Second World War"(p.53). Robert Jervis also looks positively on the role of the United States, claiming that the United States is much the same as it was in 1950 and that it is international politics that has changed. "We are experiencing the longest period of peace among the great powers in history"(p.99), due to nuclear weapons, the nature of a bipolar world up to 1990, and a growing compatibility since then between American values and world politics. This has led to a safer world, made by Americans, in the American image.

Countering the collection's more upbeat beginning, several contributors take a more critical line regarding US policy. Forcing the reader to question the volume's opening interpretations, they suggest that American foreign policy has indeed left an Ambiguous Legacy. Walter LaFeber, in "The Tension between Democracy and Capitalism during the American Century", denies that democracy has been the prime mover behind US foreign policy. In fact, the key factor is the need to support and expand the capitalist system based on private capital, private property and open markets. LaFeber persuasively argues that support for expanding American liberal democracy has been "an on-and-mostly-off policy during the American Century"(p.154), based on elements such as a fear of truly popular democracy and American support for any authoritarian regime so long as it wasn't communist.

Joan Hoff follows the more critical line, urging that the US "take stock and shoulder responsibility not only for the future but for some of the less than savory aspects of the last fifty years of American domination"(p.184). Hoff also raises the question of human rights, an issue too often neglected by American policy makers. Michael Hunt also questions American policy, specifically in East Asia. With particular regard to consumer culture, he even suggests that Walt Disney, rather than Henry Luce, is the more telling prophet of American actions in the region. Gerald Horne considers the overlooked and sensitive relationship between race and foreign policy throughout the American Century and finds that with the increasing power of Japan and China, the issue is as relevant as ever.

Bruce Cumings is even more critical of American policy in the Third World. Highlighting the ever growing divide between the world's rich and poor, he argues that the United States has failed completely to play the humanitarian, "Good Samaritan" role that Luce had urged. In terms of progress, "the Third World moves not up the developmental ladder, but from statehood to catastrophe"(p.298).

Moving away from the question of the nature of American influence in the wider world, three essays consider competing traditions that drive American foreign policy. In "The Idea of the National Interest", H. W Brands considers how American foreign policy has been led by ideas of prosperity, democracy, and security. Godfrey Hodgson, however,

argues that the American frontier and American immigration have led to opposing and fluctuating ideas about America's world role. Editor Michael Hogan, in an essay exclusive to this volume, looks at partisan politics and the continuing debates between isolationism and internationalism. While the tensions between these traditions have clearly influenced American thinking, the three approaches are not mutually exclusive, leaving readers to make up their own minds as to which traditions have been the most significant.

Two further essays consider neglected approaches to the study foreign policy outside of traditional Washington channels. Akira Iriye takes an imaginative look at non-governmental organizations (NGO's), arguing that their proliferation is one way in which the last century is truly American. NGO's relating to the United Nations and women's organisations have focused on a moral and humanitarian outlook, and International NGO's are spreading that vision globally. In this respect, Iriye sees NGO's as spreading American "core values"(p.436), although whether those "core values" deserve to labelled specifically "American" is another argument altogether. From a different perspective, Volker Berghahn looks at the role of philanthropic foundations in the spread of American power and culture. In addition to the covert Cold War fight against communism, as carried on by the Congress of Cultural Freedom, the foundations also took the fight to European cultural anti-Americanism. While spreading the idea of an American high culture, American mass culture was seen in an increasingly favourable light.

The question of culture is taken up in greater depth by Reinhold Wagnleitner, who argues that "however important the military power and political promise of the United States were for setting the foundation for American successes in Cold War Europe, it was the American economic and cultural attraction that really won over the hearts and minds of young people for Western democracy"(p.473). Rob Kroes agrees that the spread of American culture has indeed defined the American Century, but that non-Americans alter that culture to fit their own needs. The idea of culture appears again in Emily Rosenberg's "Consuming Women", which seeks to explore "how images of women have helped to construct the idea of and the responses to an 'American Century'"(p.461). Though more limited in its claims than other contributions, Rosenberg highlights the connection between gender imagery and Americanisation, and points the way for further investigation of the relationship between representations of gender and foreign relations.

Overall, the volume has a great deal to offer, particularly the broad range of interpretative viewpoints. No reader is likely to agree with all of the essays contained within, but there is almost certainly something for everyone. Yet if one essay particularly fits your own assumptions, the following article will almost certainly challenge them. In addition to the differing viewpoints on American foreign policy, the range of innovative perspectives on the American Century adds an extra dimension to the volume, and will stimulate any reader of history, not just foreign policy specialists. The book is an excellent collection for all students of American foreign relations, young and old, new and experienced.

Frank Ninkovich's *The Wilsonian Century* also provides a new interpretive look at US foreign policy, though on a much greater scale than the individual essays of Hogan's book. His argument is also distinctly unlike any found in *The Ambiguous Legacy*. He aimed to provide a broad "factually more inclusive introductory narrative for a non-professional audience."(p.1), and he succeeds admirably in doing so, in a relatively concise though extremely dense volume. While he claims it is "neither a textbook or a

comprehensive survey"(p.16), it is as comprehensive as any interpretive work can be that aims to span 100 years in 292 pages. Indeed, Ninkovich's narrative and argument defy all attempts at brief summary.

Ninkovich rejects previous interest based interpretations such as George Kennan's *American Diplomacy 1900-1950* and William Appleman Williams' *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, as "they have failed in their attempts to use objective or structural realities to explain why events in the twentieth century turned out the way they did"(p.10). Instead of imposing a predetermined framework on past events, Ninkovich aims to comprehend the decisions of policy makers by understanding their own values and assumptions. Ninkovich uses Wilsonian ideology – based on fear rather than idealism - as a framework to simply show why policy makers acted as they did rather than to justify the nature of their actions in the wider world. Although in this respect the book avoids the explicit triumphalism of Tony Smith's article in *The Ambiguous Legacy*, it soon becomes clear that American policy makers have consistently held the belief that their actions were in the best interests of the world as a whole.

Ninkovich aims to show that two foreign policy ideologies persisted through the twentieth century. The first, "normal" internationalism, is the default ideology of the US, "a natural outgrowth of the commercial and cultural internationalism of the nineteenth century"(p.12), which involves considerable international activity from the private sector, exemplified by President William H. Taft's "Dollar Diplomacy" and the "normalcy" of the 1920s. The second is crisis internationalism, or Wilsonianism. Based on imaginative assumptions about the state of the world, Woodrow Wilson imposed a historical narrative upon the world in which total war was no longer an effective tool of diplomacy, the European balance of power was no longer stable, and the new global nature of the world meant that any war, anywhere, had the potential to escalate into a conflict that could threaten liberal democracy. This new definition of a threat to the United States is deemed "crucial to understanding American policy in the twentieth century"(p.14), and the solution to this threat, the glue intended to hold the ill-fated League of Nations together, was the somewhat nebulous concept of world opinion.

Ninkovich argues that his approach highlights the ideological character of US foreign policy in the twentieth century. In connecting Wilsonian ideals to the events of the Cold War, he aims to show that "American internationalism *was* truly exceptional because it abandoned the idea of interest as traditionally understood over thousands of years, opting instead to identify its national security with global needs"(p.16)

Building on the growing world role of the US at the turn of the century, Taft "authored the first chapter of a new volume in American foreign policy history"(p.26), rejecting the warlike methods of his predecessor Theodore Roosevelt in favour of "peaceful cooperation and commercial expansion"(p.27). Taft was optimistic about how the global relations of "civilised" powers would function, an optimism shattered by the events of World War I. Wilson's vision of a modern global threat that could undermine America's liberal democratic order if not civilization itself took the US into the war with an ideological thrust best displayed in Wilson's fourteen points. However, the idealism of the League of Nations and the alarm of a Wilsonianism based on fear failed to last in the public mind beyond the war's end, seeing a return to the normal internationalism promoted by Taft.

Only with the Cold War did Wilsonianism return, as relations with the Soviets deteriorated and the emergence of a further threat to the American way left Wilsonianism "normalized as a way of dealing with a threat of infinite duration"(p.146.)

By 1950 and the Korean war, a strategically and economically immaterial area took on a great new importance, and without realizing it, Wilsonianism had become the “cold war’s realism”(p.146).

In focusing on the global outlook of Wilsonianism, the narrative is remarkably broad in scope, touching on almost all key policy issues and placing them in a Wilsonian framework. In addition to the more obvious events of the Cold War and US-Soviet relations, the work gives due consideration to US policy in Asia and Latin America. More significant however, is the new interpretation of Wilsonian internationalism, one that connects American policy throughout the short twentieth century, from World War I through to the end of the Cold War, in addition to the idea of an underlying normal internationalism.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Ninkovich’s analysis is the changing and occasionally fuzzy definition of Wilsonianism. He admits that the assumptions of American internationalism “defied precise articulation”(p.225) during the 1960s, but that still seems to be the case today. The Wilsonianism that re-emerges during the Cold War is a nationalised internationalism, placing the US much closer to unilateralism and further from mulitlateralism than Wilson had ever desired. Although the UN is dismissed as being outside of the Wilsonian tradition, private internationalists at the end of World War II believed that the concept and creation of an international organisation truly fulfilled Wilson’s dream. The heart of Wilsonianism as defined here is the world opinion that would make such an organisation work, but there were clearly occasions during the Cold War, such as Vietnam, when it was sacrificed for credibility. Separating Wilsonian idealism from Wilsonianism would seem to distort Wilson’s assumptions about the state of the world - something Nincovich claimed to aim to avoid.

A final though more trivial disappointment is the lack of a bibliography. A book that offers such a sweeping interpretation as this is certain to provoke discussion not only on the wider interpretation, but also on more specific issues. As a result, the lack of direction for further reading, especially for the interested “non-professional” reader, is unfortunate. At the very least, suggestions for further reading could have been provided.

On the whole, Ninkovich’s work combines a comprehensive narrative with a new and convincing interpretation, one certain to stimulate all readers, especially those who still subscribe to Cold War debates over realism versus economic interests. Alongside Hogan’s collection, *The Wilsonian Century* proves that there is more to diplomatic history than bipolar right-left debates, the actions of elite statesman, and the narrow detail of who sent which telegram to whom. Both works provide an excellent introduction to the field, displaying imaginative new approaches that prove that the history of US foreign policy is a vital and dynamic field moving into the twenty-first century.

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